

Compelling Reasons for the Expansion of Chinese Military Forces

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In March 2015, during the ongoing civil war in Yemen, the situation deteriorated as Saudi Arabia led air strikes against Houthi forces. In an unprecedented move, China's People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy fleet withdrew from an escort mission in the Gulf of Aden off the coast of Somalia to directly assist in evacuation operations in Yemen.¹ The warships managed to evacuate over 600 Chinese citizens and 279 foreign citizens, demonstrating China's growing commitment to protect its overseas assets. This marked a new milestone for the country.

China has long stood firm on its policy of noninterference. Over the past two decades, however, with global tensions heating up, China's growing global investments, and the increasing number of Chinese citizens traveling and working abroad, there has been a significant shift in actions being taken by China to assist its overseas citizens.

An opinion piece published in the East Asia Forum explained that the concept of "protecting nationals abroad" first caught the attention of China's top leadership as early as 2004. By 2012, it had become a priority of the Chinese Communist Party. According to the article, China now faces new global risks, since Chinese companies, workers, and tourists are now located all over the world.²

While the efforts of embassy personnel to facilitate the evacuation of Chinese nationals and foreign citizens from dangerous situations are not surprising, the more recent commitment of military resources is. These are signs of a new trend, one of increased military intervention and an extended overseas military presence in the years to come. This article provides some possible insights into China's perception of its transitioning role and what we might expect in the future based on its involvement in overseas evacuations over the past several decades.



A Chinese soldier of the People's Liberation Army Navy stands guard 29 March 2015 as Chinese citizens board the naval ship *Linyi* at a port in Aden, Yemen. China's Defence Ministry said its warships had completed an evacuation of Chinese nationals with more than 570 people safely transported across the Red Sea to Djibouti to be flown home. The Chinese characters on the banner read, "Welcome Chinese compatriots on board." (Photo by stringer, Reuters)

Evolution of China's Commitment to Overseas Citizens and Assets

Since Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms opened up China to the rest of the world nearly four decades ago, an increasing number of Chinese citizens have been traveling abroad. Each year their numbers climb. In 1978, approximately two hundred thousand Chinese citizens traveled overseas. By 2003, that number increased one hundred times to 20.2 million.³ In 2014, over one hundred million Chinese citizens had traveled abroad.⁴

There has also been a marked increase in the number of Chinese working abroad. By the end of 2006 an estimated 675,000 Chinese worked overseas, mostly in developing countries. That same year, more than ten thousand Chinese enterprises had set up businesses in over two hundred countries and regions.⁵ By 2012, there were more than five million Chinese nationals working abroad.⁶ They can be found in both developed and developing countries.

The growing number of Chinese citizens working overseas can be attributed to a number of factors. For example, China's saturated domestic markets and inadequate access to domestic resources have prompted companies to operate in other countries. The nonrenewable nature of petroleum, coupled with China's current and forecasted requirements, has scattered the country's oil companies across the globe in search of energy.

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Oftentimes, Chinese companies have sought opportunities in some of the more volatile, less desirable regions of the world, attracted by decreased competition and easier access. Potential competitors often avoid doing business in certain locations for a variety of reasons, ranging from legalistic (i.e., sanctioned countries) to moralistic (i.e., countries accused of gross corruption, genocide, or other atrocities). However, China's business policy makes

it an ideal partner for such countries. While China willingly renders aid to corrupt and problematic countries with no questions asked, Western organizations demand transparency and accountability.

China's growing involvement in unstable countries increases its need to protect its assets and citizens. In the past, any assistance to Chinese citizens came from other countries, sometimes through coordination by Chinese embassies, but with no involvement by the Chinese military. For example, in March 1997, foreign militaries stepped in to evacuate their citizens from Albania when the country slipped into anarchy fueled by failed investment schemes. The German army, the U.S. Marine Corps, and the British, French, and Greek navies were among some of the foreign militaries carrying out evacuation operations. At one point, Greek armed forces evacuated 250 people—mostly Chinese, Jordanian, and Egyptian nationals—via a missile boat and frigate. However, there was no indication of any involvement by the Chinese military during the crisis.⁷

The following year, after an escalation of the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict, the Chinese government facilitated the evacuation of Chinese business people and part of the Chinese embassy staff from Eritrea.⁸ Again, there was no indication that the military was involved. Two years later, during a military coup in the Solomon Islands on 7 June 2000, the Chinese Foreign Ministry set up an emergency group and assisted Chinese citizens in evacuating the islands, including seeking assistance from other countries.

In 2004, during the 10th National People's Congress, Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing promised that more effort would be given to caring for the interests of the Chinese people in the international arena. Luo Tianguang, director general of the Department of Consular Affairs under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said the ministry had been working hard to improve the system by providing better consular protection.⁹ According to Luo, the ministry had built an emergency response mechanism to be activated during any major incident involving mass deaths, injuries, or property loss of Chinese citizens' overseas.¹⁰ As part of the plan, the ministry had set up a twenty-four-hour telephone hotline and various departments to step in when necessary.

During March 2005, in Kyrgyzstan, opposition supporters seized the presidential headquarters and ousted Askar Akayev's government from power. Rioting and looting took place and, among other things, dozens



of Chinese shops were ransacked. With four Chinese businessmen injured, the Chinese Embassy in Bishkek arranged for special planes and cars to help Chinese citizens evacuate from the country. Approximately ten thousand Chinese citizens lived in Kyrgyzstan at the time.¹¹

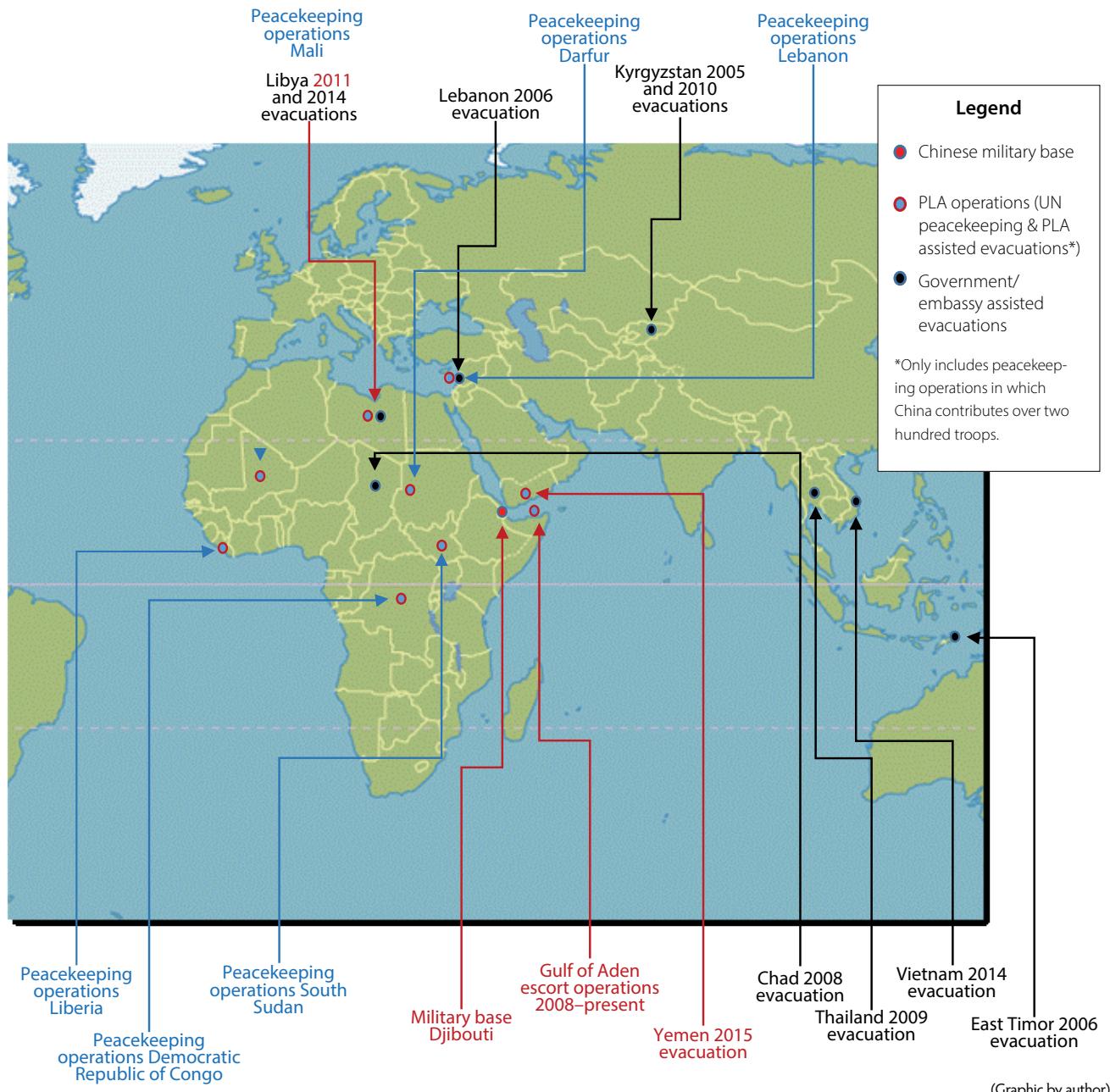
In 2006, diplomats from the ministry's consular division helped evacuate about eight hundred Chinese citizens from Solomon, East Timor, Lebanon, and Tonga.¹² The increased consular intervention in evacuations prompted the Chinese government in 2007 to vow to improve protection of the "growing numbers of Chinese citizens living and working abroad."¹³ In 2008, an outbreak of civil war in Chad prompted Chinese embassy officials to arrange for the evacuation of over four hundred Chinese engineers and experts working with Chinese funded enterprises in the country.¹⁴

Over time, consular intervention and action increased. In late 2009, Beijing arranged to have eleven commercial aircraft evacuate 3,100 Chinese citizens from Thailand following the dissolution of the ruling party and the banning of Premier Somchai Wongsawat from politics over vote-buying allegations that sparked turmoil in the country.¹⁵

Soldiers of the Chinese People's Liberation Army 1st Amphibious Mechanized Infantry Division prepare to provide Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Mike Mullen with a demonstration of their capabilities 12 July 2011 during his visit to the unit in China. (Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Chad J. Mcneeley, U.S. Navy)

In 2010, China turned to chartered planes to airlift 1,200 Chinese citizens from Kyrgyzstan after ethnic violence broke out in June. This was reportedly the largest evacuation operation using charter flights.¹⁶

There was no evidence of involvement by the Chinese military during any of the aforementioned evacuation operations. However, later in 2010, Gu Weijun, a scholar with the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences, outlined five ways he believed that Chinese troops would be used in the future. Stressing the need for more armed intervention to protect and evacuate Chinese overseas expatriates, Gu pointed out that China's citizens and expatriates living abroad had encountered an increasing number of attacks in recent years. He argued that China's global economic expansion meant that it would also need to expand its military globally and, "in the future, China's use of troops



(Graphic by author)

Figure. People's Liberation Army's (PLA) Expanding Global Presence

overseas will be inevitable.”¹⁷ Then, in 2011, for the first time, the Chinese military stepped in to perform an international evacuation of Chinese citizens abroad.

Militarization of China's International Evacuation Operations

In February 2011, as Libyan Prime Minister Muammar Gaddafi's regime stood on the brink of collapse, both the PLA Navy (PLAN) and the PLA Air Force (PLAAF) were tasked to assist in the evacuation of

over thirty-five thousand Chinese nationals from Libya. This marked an important turning point for the PLA.

As part of the effort, the PLAN summoned its frigate, *Xuzhou*, which was part of a flotilla off the Gulf of Aden protecting Chinese vessels and personnel sailing through the Somali waters. *Xuzhou* was ideally located to assist in the evacuation effort. The decision to task *Xuzhou* set a new precedent and attracted the attention of scholars and PLA analysts inside and outside of China. Some claimed that “the move reflected an array of strategic interests for

Beijing—and could prove to be the first of many such missions.”¹⁸ Maj. Gen. Ji Mingkui, a professor with the PLA’s National Defense University, suggested that the role of the PLAN abroad should expand into other less traditional areas: “We will not only dispatch warships to evacuate our people overseas (when needed) in the future, but in other ways ... to protect our national interests overseas because our navy’s mission will be expanded as time goes on.”¹⁹

The *Xuzhou*, which had special forces troops, a Z-9 helicopter and hangar, and a “store of surface-to-air missiles” lacked the capacity to transport any evacuees. Instead, it escorted merchant ships tasked with rescuing Chinese civilians while remaining alert for any significant increase in the threat level.²⁰

In addition to the PLAN, the PLAAF also contributed evacuation efforts in Libya. In one article, PLAN Capt. Liu Jun recounts the day the PLAAF was summoned to provide assistance to the evacuation. He explains that, upon receiving the command, his regiment thought they had misheard. The distance between the airfield in which his (unidentified) PLAAF regiment was located and Sabha, Libya, was more than 9,500 km (5,903 miles). It was the longest flight path ever taken by the PLAAF, and it spurred a new way of thinking about building battle effectiveness. Liu raises the question, “In the past, everyone compared the military to the Great Wall and emphasized our duty to defend our territory and position consciousness. However, today, where are the frontiers that we have to defend?”²¹ China’s 2013 defense white paper offers more details in the PLAAF’s role, explaining that “the PLAAF sent four aircraft at short notice, flew forty sorties, evacuated 1,655 people (including 240 Nepalese) from Libya to Sudan, and took 287 Chinese nationals from Sudan back home.”²² The White Paper further states, “vessel protection at sea, evacuation of Chinese nationals overseas, and emergency rescue have become important ways and means for the PLA to safeguard national interests and fulfill China’s international obligations.”²³

The 2011 evacuation from Libya was truly a milestone. Not only was it the biggest evacuation effort in which China had participated, but it drew attention to the growing importance of these types of operations. Following China’s use of the *Xuzhou* to provide security for the 2011 evacuation from Libya, Song Xiaojun, a Beijing-based military analyst, concluded that the

PLAN’s participation in the humanitarian crisis in Libya would help our army to fight for

more funding and resources for our defense budget. With more ... Chinese workers and technicians working overseas, in ... countries with unstable political situations, our country needs to protect their lives and safety as they are also working for our overseas investments.²⁴

By 2014, Libya was once again in turmoil, as rival militia clashes in the Libyan capital of Tripoli and the eastern city of Benghazi left at least 214 people dead and nearly 1,000 more wounded. Fearing that the fighting would escalate into a full-fledged civil war, countries (China among them) rushed to evacuate their citizens caught within the turmoil.²⁵ Between May and September 2014, over one thousand Chinese citizens were evacuated from Libya.²⁶ While there are no indications that the PLA assisted in the evacuation, that September China opened a twenty-four-hour global hotline, “12308,” to help Chinese citizens abroad. According to Foreign Minister Wang Yi, the hotline would allow Beijing to be briefed “in a timely manner about the suffering and demand of Chinese citizens abroad” and deliver help when it is needed.²⁷ A Chinese antiterrorism studies researcher from the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations attributed the increase in China’s consular assistance service to “the increasing complexity of security overseas.”²⁸

An Unprecedented Evacuation from Yemen

In March 2015, the PLAN once again sprang into action, this time in Yemen. As mentioned above, with an ongoing civil war, the atmosphere in Yemen deteriorated as Saudi Arabia led air strikes against Houthi forces. With the situation escalating, a number of countries, China included, began evacuating their citizens.

China has a special interest in Yemen. Having established diplomatic relations with Yemen in 1956, bilateral relations were upgraded to “ambassadorial level” in 1963. Over the years, China has invested heavily in Yemen’s development and construction sectors. However, energy has since become a huge draw. In September 2012, the China National Corporation of Overseas Economic Cooperation agreed to construct three natural-gas-fueled power plants in the country. Then, in 2013, both countries reached a deal to build a series of power plants with a combined capacity of five gigawatts (a gigawatt is equal to one billion watts, enough to power between 300,000 and 750,000 homes if it were in the United

States.)²⁹ And, by 2014, Chinese companies Sinochem Corp and Sinopec were producing approximately twenty thousand barrels of oil per day (80 percent of Yemen's total production).³⁰ In 2014, Beijing was selected for a \$508 million project to expand two container ports in Aden and Mokha. China is reportedly financing the projects through a soft loan. It has also offered millions of dollars in relief aid for displaced Yemenis, medical supplies to the Yemeni-Chinese Friendship Hospital, and grants and loans to Yemen's defense ministry.

Similar to the 2011 evacuation from Libya, China tapped into its PLAN escort mission in the Gulf of Aden. This time, however, instead of summoning one ship, China summoned three ships—two missile frigates and a supply ship with two shipborne helicopters onboard. Also in contrast to the 2011 operation, the PLAN physically carried out the evacuations as opposed to serving in a security or escort role. Yemen marked the second time the PLAN was involved in evacuating Chinese and other citizens.³¹

Approximately six hundred Chinese nationals—embassy personnel, overseas students, medical workers, journalists, and technicians working for Chinese companies in oil exploration and production, communication, and other industries—were evacuated. In addition to Chinese citizens, according to Hua Chunying, a spokesperson from China's Foreign Ministry, China also helped ten countries evacuate 225 of their citizens.³²

Interestingly, only one year earlier, China had conducted another major evacuation, this time from Vietnam, following a wave of anti-Chinese riots. The unrest was caused over a Chinese oil rig *Haiyuang Shiyou 981* moving into disputed waters in the South China Sea and resulted in two Chinese workers being killed and over one hundred injured. Many of those evacuated were workers employed at Chinese-owned factories or construction projects in Vietnam.³³

The evacuation from Vietnam, however, did not involve the PLA. Instead, Chinese officials dispatched four passenger ships to evacuate more than 3,500 Chinese nationals affected by the violence. Each of these ships, the *Wuzhishan*, *Tongguling*, *Zijing 12*, and *Baishiling*, had a capacity of one thousand passengers. Most of the evacuees on the four ships were workers from Metallurgical Corporation of China, a state-owned contractor helping construct an iron and steel complex in Vietnam's Ha Tinh Province.

Why China opted to send either PLA forces or charter ships and aircraft in these situations is not completely clear. In the case of Vietnam, it could be that China did not want to come across as using military force due to the already volatile situation in the South China Sea. To introduce the PLAN or PLAAF to the situation could have further stirred the pot of ongoing tension. In the case of the Yemen and Libya evacuations, sending the PLA might have been born out of convenience and reassurance that Chinese forces were not making a show of power, but rather simply ensuring Chinese citizens had a safe passage home. The perceptions of the PLA differed in each situation and environment. Understanding that brings a modicum of clarity to China's motivations.

Beefing Up Global Presence

Along with its escort mission in the Gulf of Aden, China has been taking other steps that are creating a more global military presence. Whether intentional or not, in each case, China has been opening up new security options from which to be able to draw in the event of future evacuation operations. The PLA has been expanding its presence through escort missions, peacekeeping missions, and most recently a forward-deployed base reportedly serving as a logistics hub for these missions (see figure, page 32). In addition, China now has an aircraft carrier in its inventory, with more on the way, giving the country even greater global reach.

Escort missions in the Gulf of Aden. The PLAN has been conducting escort missions in the Gulf of Aden since late 2008 as part of the UN's antipiracy operations.³⁴ The first fleet assigned to the mission consisted of two destroyers and one supply ship originating from China's Hainan Island. Onboard were approximately eight hundred crew members, including seventy soldiers from the Navy's special forces. The destroyers were equipped with missiles, cannons, and light weapons.³⁵ Since then, the PLAN has had a task force in place to conduct naval escort missions. It launched its twenty-third mission on 7 April 2016.

International UN peacekeeping missions. China has been a regular contributor to UN peacekeeping missions for over twenty-five years. Since 1990, over thirty thousand Chinese peacekeepers have served in more than thirty peacekeeping missions around the world, with the highest concentration in Africa. Recent missions indicate an even more dramatic shift toward



the commitment of its forces. For example, on 26 March 2015, China sent a peacekeeping infantry battalion to Juba, South Sudan. This commitment of armed and more capable personnel set a new standard and marked a profound shift in the country's attitude toward UN peacekeeping missions. Since Chinese peacekeepers are drawn from a pool of some of the most qualified members of the PLA, these forces are an excellent source of support for evacuation operations if needed.

Djibouti: China's first overseas military base. In 2013, the National Defense University of the PLA submitted a proposal to the Central Military Commission (CMC) to build a military base in Djibouti. Approved by President Xi Jinping and operational in 2017, this marks China's first overseas military base.

According to various Chinese sources, when China first began conducting escort missions in the Gulf of Aden, the ships and their crews received no breaks, remaining at sea for six months straight. This caused depression and mental anguish amongst Chinese sailors. The base in Djibouti gives Chinese ships a port to freely access whenever needed for port calls to improve personnel morale. It also meets the logistical needs of the task force and the supply ships that transport goods to the ships.³⁶

Some sources claim that the base is not responsible for combat operations, referring to it instead as a "support facility." According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, the base will provide logistics to Chinese troops and naval vessels participating in UN peacekeeping and humanitarian aid operations.³⁷

Other Chinese sources in favor of the base explain that "regional peace and stability serve the interests of all countries and meet the shared aspirations of China, Djibouti, and other countries around the world."³⁸

The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) Jiangkai II class guided-missile frigate *Xuzhou* (FFG 530) steams past the forward-deployed Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyer *USS Stethem* (DDG 63) 20 November 2015 after participating in a Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea and a search-and-rescue exercise in the East China Sea. *Stethem* visited Shanghai to build relationships with the PLAN and demonstrate the U.S. Navy's commitment to the Indo-Asia-Pacific. (Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Kevin V. Cunningham, U.S. Navy)

Chinese reports, however, seem contradictory as to the function of and intention behind the Djibouti base. Chinese officials insist that the base is nothing more than a support facility, but what does this mean exactly? One report explains that

China's overseas interests are expanding. At present, there are thirty thousand Chinese enterprises all over the world and several million Chinese working and living in all corners of the world. Last year [2015] ... the stock of China's overseas assets reached several trillion U.S. dollars. So, it has become a pressing task for China's diplomacy to better protect our ever-growing overseas interests.³⁹

However, according to the same report, "The PLA's responsibilities today have gone beyond the scale of guarding Chinese territories. The PLA must protect China's interests anywhere in the world. Overseas military bases will provide cutting-edge support for China to guard its growing overseas interests." In addition, one Navy commander alludes to building more bases by pointing out that Djibouti provides China with experience to build (additional) overseas military bases. As the report notes, "Djibouti is just the first step."⁴⁰



Aircraft carrier diplomacy. Another example of the expansion of China's overseas military presence, and another source to draw from for evacuations, is the country's first aircraft carrier, the *Liaoning*. Commissioned in 2012, the *Liaoning* was originally a Soviet aircraft carrier known as *Varyag*. China purchased the unfinished hull in 1998 and, after towing it from Ukraine three years later, completely modernized the hull, radar, and electronic systems. While the *Liaoning* was originally intended to be used for training missions, it was reported to be combat ready in November 2016, and one month later, China reportedly staged the first live-fire drills involving the carrier.⁴¹ According to the Taiwanese Defense Ministry, China is building two more aircraft carriers that will be the same size as the *Liaoning*. Some sources believe a second carrier will be complete by 2020.⁴²

While the *Liaoning* has attracted international attention and raised some concern over China's military expansion, the country has downplayed it by describing it as "aircraft carrier diplomacy." According to an article published in *China Military Online*, "aircraft carrier diplomacy can improve the overseas environment for investment and the living environment of

United Nations (UN) trucks transport the military personnel of the Chinese engineering company of the UN Organization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to a 1.8 kilometer-long road rehabilitation project 11 April 2008. The road provides greater access to the Ruzizi One Dam Power Plant, the only source of electricity for eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Africa. (Photo by Marie Frechon, UN)

overseas Chinese and Chinese nationals, and help protect the state's overseas assets and the life and property of overseas Chinese and Chinese nationals."⁴³

The article further states that,

if the massive and powerful aircraft carrier taskforce is used as an effective tool of foreign exchange, it can influence and improve China's relations with the investment destinations and host countries, and prevent anti-Chinese events. In case of a crisis, we can also quickly dispatch the aircraft carrier task force to relevant sea areas to bear down strongly on the anti-Chinese forces, stop their violent actions, and take emergency measures when necessary to evacuate both Chinese citizens in

China-funded enterprises and Chinese nationals and overseas Chinese.

Training in Noncombatant Evacuation Operations

The PLA has been speeding up its emergency responses and “improving the mobilization of national-level resources.”⁴⁴ In March 2016, China established the Overseas Operations Office. According to *Janes*, the office is a component of the Operations Bureau of the Joint Staff Department, one of the fifteen primary departments now under the CMC.⁴⁵ The CMC Joint Staff Department is the headquarters and command organ of the PLA. The Overseas Operations Office, which is run by the PLA, is reportedly responsible for directing and coordinating actions, including overseas evacuations, carried out by Chinese troops overseas. Due to the diverse international nature of its tasks, it is expected to have a high level of political and diplomatic savvy, or what one article describes as “policy capacity” so that it can effectively spearhead international operations. In other words, with each unique military operation—such as overseas escort, rescue, and evacuation operations—having unique requirements, there are different expectations and actions that need to be taken. A hostage rescue might require special negotiations. An evacuation might require special consent from a foreign government for PLA troops to enter.

The responsibilities of the Overseas Operations Office are also believed to include participating in joint actions with foreign militaries. The Overseas Operations Office first made its debut in March 2016 during a two-day “Joint Evacuation-2016” China-U.K. joint noncombatant evacuation operations tabletop exercise held in Nanjing. It was reportedly the first evacuation drill “jointly conducted by the Chinese and a foreign military.” According to Zhang Junshe, a military expert, the Chinese Navy has gained a wealth of experience from its past evacuations in Libya and Yemen. Meanwhile, China was further able to benefit from the British Navy, which

has “rich experience in overseas evacuations.” Finally, the exercise helped to pave the way for China to work with foreign militaries on similar operations in the future.⁴⁶

Conclusion

Turbulence, terrorism, and piracy, as well as natural disasters and epidemics in some areas, have posed threats to China’s overseas interests. The changing international arena is forcing the country to rethink its strategies. According to “The Diversified Employment of China’s Armed Forces,”

With the gradual integration of China’s economy into the world economic system, overseas interests have become an integral component of China’s national interests. Security issues are increasingly prominent, involving overseas energy and resources, strategic sea lines of communication, and Chinese nationals and legal persons overseas. Vessel protection at sea, evacuation of Chinese nationals overseas, and emergency rescue have become important ways and means for the PLA to safeguard national interests and fulfill China’s international obligations.⁴⁷

The latest white paper on *China’s Military Strategy* lists safeguarding “the security of the country’s overseas interests” and its “security and interest in new domains” as a strategic task to be shouldered by its armed forces.⁴⁸

China’s use of its military in evacuation operations shows growing capability and confidence in that capability. While some might view China’s increasing use of its military overseas as a threat, China sees it as a necessity. Furthermore, as China expands its overseas interests abroad, the Chinese government and military are forced to increase their involvement. China is taking steps that indicate the PLA will become increasingly more active in the evacuation of its citizens overseas, which means that it will most likely also increase its presence in other ways overseas. The question is, how far will it go? ■

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